

Working Together for Children and Families: Where TANF and Child Welfare Meet

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SUMMARY. While the organizational systems designed to provide cash assistance and child welfare services have been separate since the 1970s, changes wrought by welfare reform in the late 1990s suggest new opportunities for organizational collaboration. This paper examines the link between family poverty and child maltreatment, and the policy levers that can be employed to inhibit or promote child and family well-

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being within the context of welfare reform. It then reviews one state's experience with inter-organizational collaboration between welfare and child welfare and the special challenges agencies face in attempting to streamline services. *[Article copies available for a fee from The Haworth Document Delivery Service: 1-800-HAWORTH. E-mail address: <docdelivery@haworthpress.com> Website: <<http://www.HaworthPress.com>> © 2006 by The Haworth Press, Inc. All rights reserved.]*

KEYWORDS. TANF, child welfare, welfare reform

Temporary Assistance to Needy Families is designed to offer cash assistance to low-income families, the majority of whom are headed by single mothers. In general, typical service activities of TANF staff focus on accessing employment-related information for clients, assessing and addressing barriers to employment, and offering services to propel and support movement into the labor market (Nightingale, Kramer, Trutko, Egner, & Barnow, 2003; Thompson, Van Nexx, & O'Brien, 2001). Child welfare services are designed to support parents in their parenting role and protect children from maltreatment. Typical service activities of child welfare staff center on assessing child safety, determining family problems and needs, and accessing resources to support parents and reduce the likelihood of maltreatment recurrence (Ginsberg, 2001). While the goals of these programs differ, they share a great deal in common. Both programs target families struggling to get by in one or more life domains; they also largely serve very young children. Two-thirds of clients involved in TANF are children, and half of these are ages six or younger (U.S. House of Representatives, 2004). Of the cases reported to child welfare services, the youngest among these are the most likely to be victimized (USDHHS, 2005). Both programs are aimed at assisting parents in their roles vis-à-vis children: TANF focuses on the parent's role as a provider, and child welfare focuses on the parent's role as a caregiver. In many cases, both programs also target—largely or entirely—populations struggling with the challenges posed by American poverty.

While the organizational systems designed to provide cash assistance and child welfare services have been separate since the 1970s (see Frame, 1999 for a review), changes wrought by welfare reform in the late 1990s suggest new opportunities for organizational collaboration. What are the links between family poverty and child maltreatment, and

to what extent will TANF propel greater numbers of vulnerable families into the child welfare system? After reviewing these questions, this paper examines one state's experience with inter-organizational collaboration between welfare and child welfare services.

THE INTERSECT: POVERTY AND MALTREATMENT

Research has demonstrated a strong correlation between poverty and child maltreatment. For example, the Third National Incidence Study of Child Abuse and Neglect (NIS-3) revealed that children from families with incomes below \$15,000 were more than 20 times more likely to be maltreated than children from homes where family income was greater than \$30,000 (Sedlak & Broadhurst, 1996). Although poverty is the strongest predictor of maltreatment, the correlation between the two phenomena does not signify causation. Instead, a confluence of factors related to poverty appear to exert certain pressures on parenting such as parental stress precipitated by material hardship, and other stressful life events that, in turn, can detrimentally affect parenting behaviors (Berger & Brooks-Gunn, 2005). Thus, TANF policies may serve to increase the likelihood of child welfare involvement for poor families if policies such as work requirements, sanctions, and lifetime limits reduce the material resources available to families and heighten the experience of parental stress. Conversely, policies may serve to reduce maltreatment rates if child poverty rates are decreased, and factors such as parental stress are ameliorated (Frame & Berrick, 2003). Before welfare reform, researchers knew little about the relationship between family involvement in welfare and the family's subsequent or simultaneous involvement in the child welfare program. Since the late 1990s, research in this area has expanded substantially.

Welfare and Child Welfare Populations

Though poverty is a predictor of child maltreatment, the majority of those who receive welfare assistance do not maltreat their children. To gain an understanding about the scope of the overlap, it is useful to consider, relative to the general population, the extent to which the population of children in poverty intersects with the population of those children who are also involved with child welfare services. As of the last census count, there were approximately 72.6 million children under the age of 18 in the United States. The proportion of children in poverty

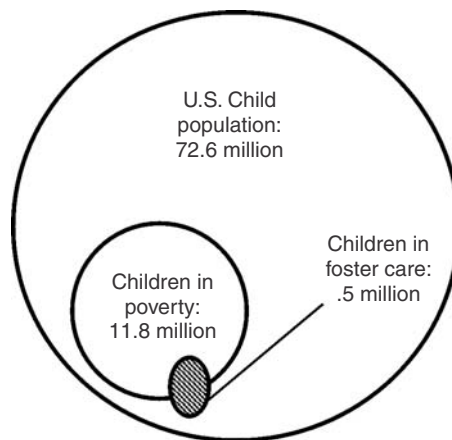
was 16.3% of the child population, or 11.8 million children. The child welfare population is significantly smaller than the child poverty population. In 2002, it is estimated that there were 896,000 victims of child abuse or neglect in the U.S. Of these, approximately 20% (about 196,000) were placed in out-of-home care (U.S.D.H.H.S., 2002). It is estimated that a majority of the children affected by child maltreatment come from the child poverty population (Geen & Tumlin, 1999). Figure 1 graphically displays the overlap of the child welfare and welfare populations.

Given that only a relatively modest proportion of families receiving welfare also have child welfare involvement, it is helpful to review the factors and characteristics, in addition to socioeconomic disadvantage, that are associated with child abuse and neglect.

Characteristics of Families Dually Involved in TANF and Child Welfare

Using pre-TANF data, several studies have examined the characteristics of welfare recipients that are associated with increased likelihood of a child welfare event. Using linked administrative data, Needell et al. (1999) examined a cohort of 63,768 children in 10 California counties entering

FIGURE 1. Proportion of Children in Foster Care as Compared to Those in Poverty in the U.S. (not to scale)



AFDC for the first time between 1990 and 1995. When the researchers examined child welfare involvement for the 1990 cohort, Needell and co-authors found that 27% of the 1990 entrants had a maltreatment report during the five-year study period. Beyond the reporting stage, 8% had an open case, and 3% of the entry cohort was placed into foster care. Further examination of the characteristics of child AFDC entrants with child welfare contact indicates that certain factors are associated with increased odds of a child welfare event. Specifically, infants, children from single-parent households, those with late or no prenatal care, Caucasian children, children born with low birthweight, and those born into large families had an increased risk, relative to their counterparts, of experiencing a child welfare event. Furthermore, increased time on aid and breaks in aid receipt (both AFDC and Medicaid) were associated with a higher likelihood of experiencing a child welfare event. These findings point to vulnerabilities among the welfare population that may serve as a preliminary means to targeted interventions.

In addition to child- and family-level demographic variables associated with increased risk for child maltreatment among welfare recipients, other studies have examined the role of variables associated with financial stress. For example, in a study examining the relationship between welfare grant reductions (including sanctions) and child welfare involvement among a random sample of 706 Chicago AFDC recipients in 1995 and 1996, Shook (1999) also surveyed a subsample of study participants ($n = 173$) to provide a more in-depth analysis of the experiences associated with changes in income among this population. The risk of child welfare involvement was significantly increased among those who experienced a grant reduction with no increase in employment income. Environmental hardships such as food or diaper shortages, an eviction threat, or utility shut-off also played a mediating role between grant reduction without subsequent employment and child welfare system involvement. Additionally, recent stressful life events such as a housing move, major household expense, or illness among a household member, compounded the risk of a child welfare event.

Courtney, Piliavin and Power (2001) examined predictors of child welfare involvement for 457 TANF applicants in Milwaukee County, both before and after TANF application. Using case-level administrative data and survey data, Courtney and his colleagues report findings consistent with those above. Namely, a greater number of children in the family and parental stress were significant predictors of child welfare involvement. Previous child protective services (CPS) investigation prior to TANF application was the best predictor of child welfare

involvement. Risk of child welfare involvement was decreased for those who were currently working or had worked within the past year.

Other studies have also identified substance abuse (Courtney, Piliavin, Dworsky, & Zinn, 2001), domestic violence and a history of childhood abuse (Derr & Taylor, 2004) as factors leading to increased involvement with child welfare services among welfare recipients. In sum, studies to date suggest that a combination of child and family level characteristics, source and amount of income and economic hardships play a role in increasing the risk for child welfare involvement among families receiving public assistance. If factors associated with increasing risk for child welfare involvement are known, states can fashion their TANF programs either to increase or inhibit the risk of maltreatment among public assistance recipients.

Aspects of TANF that May Inhibit Child Safety

Increased economic hardship is correlated with an increase in the odds of a child welfare event. Accordingly, policies that result in families having fewer material resources available may result in a heightened risk of a child welfare event, particularly when combined with the stressors mentioned previously. Using state-level administrative data, findings from a series of studies by Paxson and Waldfogel (1999, 2001) may support this hypothesis. The co-authors found that full family sanctions are associated with an increase in substantiated cases of maltreatment and physical abuse. States that implemented full family sanctions experienced a 21% increase in the number of substantiated cases of maltreatment following the 1996 federal reforms (Paxson & Waldfogel, 1999). Other strict sanctions are also associated with an increase in out-of-home care. This is consistent with findings from Ovwhigo, Leavitt, and Born (2003) who found that, among families who left TANF, cases closed due to sanctions were at a higher risk of having a post-exit child welfare event than those cases closed voluntarily, due to work, or no reapplication.

The effects of TANF time limits of less than 60 months may also be associated with a large increase in substantiated maltreatment in general, and physical abuse, in particular. Paxson and Waldfogel (1999, 2001) found that the family cap policy was associated with lower maltreatment rates, but a rise in out-of-home care placements. In short, aspects of TANF that serve to decrease the resources available to families are associated with increases in maltreatment and placement in out-of-home care. These findings are consistent with those of Shook (1999)

and Needell et al. (1999), which indicate that when benefits are reduced or interrupted, there is a significant increase in the odds of a child welfare event.

Waldfoegel (2004) cautions that while these collective findings give cause for concern, there is still a great deal that is unknown about the effects of TANF on child welfare due to the timing of its implementation. Pre-dating PRWORA, states experimented with welfare policy through federal waivers beginning in the early 1990s. Even after the passage of the 1996 welfare reform legislation, TANF was not fully implemented in some states until later in the decade, thus limiting the strength of some of these early findings. Due to the flexibility of TANF, there is also considerable variation in the nature of the programs and policies that states have elected to implement. As a rough analysis of the impact of individual components of TANF policy on foster care caseloads, Waldfoegel (2004) used “policy clusters” that measure strict vs. lenient welfare policies to assess changes in foster care caseloads from 1998-2000 across states. Her preliminary findings suggest an association between “lenient” time limit states and lower child welfare caseloads, and “strict” time limit states and increased caseloads. Future models examining a longer time span will necessarily attend to other demographic and socioeconomic factors also likely to contribute to caseload change (Waldfoegel, 2004).

Aspects of TANF that May Promote Child Safety

While a reduction in family income can have negative impacts on child welfare involvement, the opposite may also be true. Namely, Paxson and Waldfoegel (2001) found that states with more generous welfare benefits had lower levels of neglect and fewer children placed in out-of-home care. There were large effects associated with these results: a 10% increase in benefit levels was predicted to reduce neglect by 32%, and out-of-home care placements by 8%. The findings from Shook (1999) and Needell et al. (1999) echo the importance of welfare policies that decrease economic hardship. Specifically, when parents experience uninterrupted benefits and benefits that remain intact, risk of child welfare involvement is lowered. A study of pre-TANF families in Cuyahoga County, Ohio suggests that welfare benefits continue to matter once children are placed in out-of-home care. Wells and Guo (2003) found that, regardless of work status, children reunified more quickly when welfare benefits are consistent. Under TANF, states may choose to maintain benefits for families for six months when children enter

out-of-home care. The findings by Wells and Guo suggest that states that opt into this provision may promote more timely reunification.

Employment and Maltreatment

Whereas the effects of some TANF policies on child welfare outcomes appear consistent across studies, the collective findings related to parental employment are less clear. Some studies have found that the shift from cash assistance to employment has led to an increase in child welfare involvement—particularly for child neglect—and longer lengths of stay in out-of-home care (Fein & Lee, 2000; Geen, Fender, Leos-Urbel, & Markowitz, 2001; Paxson & Waldfogel, 2001; Wells & Guo, 2004).

In contrast, other studies have noted the protective effects of parental employment in regard to child welfare. In a study examining child protection reports for TANF grantees in Illinois, Slack, Holl, Lee, McDaniel, Altenbernd and Stevens (2003) found that child welfare risk was greatest for those who continued to receive welfare with no involvement in the work force. Similarly, Courtney and colleagues (2001) found that, among TANF applicants, employment was associated with decreased risk for child welfare services involvement. Finally, Shook (1999) found that, among those who experienced a reduction in benefits, child welfare involvement was more likely for those who had no subsequent income from employment than those who had income from wages.

In short, our understanding of the relationship between parental employment and child maltreatment among welfare and former welfare recipients is obfuscated by several factors. Employment may be less relevant than the type of employment, whether work serves to increase or decrease income or other stressors, whether it is attached to other work-related benefits, and/or its effects on parents' mental health and self-esteem.

Based on the mixed findings related to parental employment and child welfare, it appears that state TANF policies that balance work force involvement with continued financial and other supportive assistance may be promising. Additionally, available research suggests that addressing barriers to work through supportive services may also serve to improve parenting. For example, if parental mental health problems are the cause of unstable employment and increased stress, providing mental health counseling or other related services may effectively decrease parental stress and enable the parent to maintain stable employment. Using TANF funds to provide supportive services could act as a child welfare intervention in that the primary risk factors associated with child maltreatment for

the welfare population, namely parental stress and economic hardship, could be alleviated through a combination of benefits and supportive services.

THE PROMISE AND CHALLENGE OF TANF/CHILD WELFARE INTEGRATION

TANF policy goals are largely associated with the movement from cash assistance to work. Under PRWORA, welfare programs were largely restructured to include an array of supportive services offered to parents to promote their ability to work. Services such as domestic violence counseling, substance abuse treatment, mental health services and child care are available to clients to the extent that these barriers prevent them from securing stable employment. As Courtney (2001) points out, these are many of the same services that are provided to parents involved with the child welfare system with the goal of improving parent functioning. This overlap points to an intersection between welfare and child welfare services that could be streamlined to address both child safety and employment goals if the two systems could sufficiently coordinate efforts to address the common barriers faced by parents.

While TANF services and supports could be utilized to help promote positive parenting among families at-risk for child welfare involvement, the knowledge-base in the child welfare system regarding risk factors for maltreatment could also be employed effectively within the larger TANF population to help determine family needs. This is not to suggest that instituting practices to monitor TANF recipients' behavior is desirable. Rather, through a comprehensive assessment, determining means to reasonably alleviate family stress within the context of resources available through TANF could prevent future negative events, such as sanctions for non-compliance, that only further pose a risk for child welfare involvement. In short, the flexibility associated with TANF legislation allows for creatively blending child welfare and TANF resources in a manner that could increase family income and improve family functioning. Under TANF, it appears that the well-being of the nation's most fragile children and families depends upon the ability of states and localities to attend to the complex barriers associated with unstable employment and parental hardship.

If TANF can be used to support positive parenting, then a restructuring of traditional services is in order to provide new services and/or a new service delivery model to TANF clients. Similarly, if child welfare

staff can more effectively account for the role of poverty in increasing risk for child maltreatment and parenting challenges, efforts to make connections with TANF cash assistance programs could help to increase family income in some cases, thereby reducing the stress that accompanies parenting in poverty. One needn't look far into the TANF or the child welfare caseloads to locate families who might benefit from integrated services (see Frame & Berrick, 2003). System and service integration between TANF and child welfare bureaucracies holds promise for delivering more targeted services to families in need and—possibly—improving outcomes for poor children and families.

***Opportunities for Social Work Intervention
with Dually-Involved Clients***

Since 2000, 13 California county administrators have experimented with child welfare/TANF collaboration under a specially designed initiative called “Linkages.” Linkages included an effort to coordinate services and integrate systems between CalWORKs (California Work Opportunity and Responsibility to Kids—California's welfare to work program) and child welfare. Program administrators' goals focused on increasing client self-sufficiency; improving the relevance and quality of services to families; reducing conflicting client requirements in their interactions with the two systems; and creating safety and permanency for children.

One of the principal characteristics distinguishing Linkages from many other pilot initiatives in California and elsewhere was the role of an outside non-profit agency in facilitating the change process within counties. With financial support from a local foundation, the California Center for Research on Women and Families (CCRWF) offered modest funding to counties to initiate and maintain activities associated with the project. They organized several in-person and telephone meetings, enabling county representatives to share ideas and learn from one another; and they served as a liaison between county and state agencies. In addition, CCRWF developed a number of useful tools to assist counties in initiating and sustaining the project; to reduce redundancy among counties in creating from scratch forms, processes, and procedures; and to forward an agenda of sustainability so that the initiative's success hinged not on individuals, but upon institutionalized structures in place. CCRWF also provided frequent technical assistance services to help counties develop and implement their coordinated approach at an accelerated pace.

Methods

Under an agreement with the Center for Social Services Research at the University of California at Berkeley (UCB), researchers conducted a process evaluation of the Linkages initiative. Telephone interviews were conducted in 2003, when many counties' efforts were relatively new, to establish a baseline understanding of goals, services, processes, successes, and barriers. In 2004, researchers conducted site visits, focus groups, and individual interviews with county staff to assess 10 programs considered by CCRWF and UCB to be in relatively mature states of implementation.

Each interview or focus group lasted approximately 1 1/2 hours. In four counties management and line staff were interviewed separately, and in four counties they were interviewed jointly, due to the small size of the group. The meeting schedule included managers but no line staff in one county, and line staff but no managers in another county. In some cases, the UCB team corresponded with managers after the interviews in order to clarify information that was not made clear during the site visits. Notes were handwritten during the interviews and later transcribed. The UCB evaluation team then used qualitative methods to analyze the data. The interview data were summarized for each county and then grouped according to themes that emerged.

A total of 104 individuals participated in the follow-up interviews. Of these participants, 26 were managers and 78 were line staff or supervisors in child welfare or CalWORKs. Interviewees varied in the length of time that they had worked in their respective county agencies. The mean duration of employment with an agency was 10 years, with a range of three months to 34 years.

A Coordinated Approach

There was significant variability across the counties in their approach to coordinated services. All counties conducted some type of coordinated case planning on behalf of dually-involved clients. In some cases child welfare and CalWORKs staff met to discuss the client's needs and resources; in other cases staff included parents in their meetings; and in still other counties joint staffing was used as an opportunity for multidisciplinary team meetings, including representatives from a range of agencies such as public health, mental health, substance abuse, and/or other service providers. Some counties used "linked case planning" to allow child welfare case plan requirements (e.g., parenting classes or substance

abuse treatment) to “count” toward the welfare to work plan, or included welfare to work activities into the child welfare case plan. In the ideal model, goals, services, and timelines for child welfare and for welfare were coordinated.

Some counties used the Linkages initiative as an opportunity to colocate services; in other counties, more traditional organizational structures remained, with communication encouraged through phone calls, meetings, and e-mail.

All counties attempted to target special populations either within the welfare caseload, or within child welfare. Rather than target families with known child or parental risk factors (such as those described previously), most agencies targeted Linkages services to TANF populations with known case characteristics (such as those soon-to-be sanctioned, or child-only cases).

In child welfare, most agency administrators targeted Linkages services to families at the front end of the system: either those recently reported to child welfare for maltreatment, or those receiving in-home services.

Challenges Along the Way

After four years of Linkages, the majority of counties had relatively strong programs operating either in pilot sites or county-wide. Although our work with counties did not allow us to assess outcomes for any of the families involved in Linkages, an assessment of the process of implementation suggests that efforts to coordinate services were not without their challenges. First among these was competition between diverse programmatic goals. County staff spent considerable time attempting to balance the need to promote self-sufficiency while at the same time supporting family stability. In principle, the goals were complementary, however, in practice there was sometimes friction: workers from TANF felt the need to push for family well-being through the avenue of work, while child welfare staff sometimes saw family well-being better facilitated through temporary non-work. Through regular communication between staff, most of these tensions dissipated over time, but they were exaggerated when staff experienced bureaucratic distance or had insufficient time to communicate with workers from the corresponding agency or unit.

Second, implementation was also slowed by an imbalance in organizational acceptance of the Linkages model. CalWORKs staff tended to be very enthusiastic about Linkages. Numerous CalWORKs interview-

ees reported increased job satisfaction, principally because they felt as though they were now making a substantive difference in their clients' lives. Workers were relieved to find ways *not* to sanction families, and this was frequently accomplished by allowing child welfare activities to count toward work hours. CalWORKs staff also were more familiar with the activities associated with coordinating services. Their history working with service providers in mental health, domestic violence, and substance abuse (mandated by California legislation) prior to the Linkages initiative gave them a degree of comfort with collaborative arrangements that was somewhat less customary for child welfare staff.

The enthusiasm exhibited by CalWORKs staff was contrasted by a general reluctance to embrace the new model of service delivery among child welfare workers. This, in spite of the fact that the benefits of Linkages appeared to be greatest for child welfare workers—in the form of sometimes reduced workloads and in terms of job satisfaction. And their clients often profited as well, particularly in the form of increased accessibility of services. Child welfare workers who used Linkages acknowledged that they had less antagonistic relationships with their clients due to the collaborative process, and that the sense of shared responsibility reduced job-related stress, but many child welfare staff were indisposed to participate largely because of perceived increases in workload.

The hesitancy in child welfare was not just organizational, but also philosophical. In many of the counties where we interviewed staff, child welfare workers were reluctant to acknowledge the place of poverty in their clients' lives, despite extensive research that demonstrates the connection between poverty and child maltreatment. Many staff became defensive about the suggestion that the majority of their clients are poor, and some cited examples of wealthy clients to contradict the link between poverty and maltreatment. Their hesitance may be psychologically protective against historical criticisms that child welfare workers remove children for reasons of poverty alone (Pelton, 1989), but it is paradoxical since the Linkages program was developed precisely because of the known intersect between these two compelling problems.

CONCLUSIONS

As other states and counties consider efforts to integrate welfare and child welfare services, they can benefit from the work that has gone before them in California and elsewhere (Berns & Drake, 1999; Ehrle,

Scarcella, & Geen, 2004). Further efforts to discern where, when, and with whom integrated services can and should be provided may differ from one locality to another, but some integrated services appear to be important in a reformed welfare environment. TANF reauthorization has been stalled in Washington D.C. for almost two years, but congressional discussions to date suggest that new iterations of reform are not likely to substantially change the tenor or approach of TANF policy. In fact, current proposals forwarded by the administration suggest a tightening of work requirements for low-income parents rather than an acknowledgement of the challenges posed by child-rearing in the context of poverty. A welfare policy landscape that is reliant on time limits and sanctions will likely increase material hardships for many families (Reichman, Teitler, & Curtis, 2005). As these parents struggle to raise their children, additional family support and social services may be necessary.

While the outcomes from an integrated services approach are as yet unclear, the knowledge base in the fields of welfare and child welfare is certainly substantial enough to consider targeting special services to those most likely to face difficulties parenting under conditions of poverty. Organizational and philosophical barriers may hamper the development of these efforts, but for families dually-involved in both welfare and child welfare systems, a coordinated approach holds promise for supporting child safety and family well-being.

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